Waiting for the Day

Matthew Kuzmich
WAITING FOR THE DAY

That morning he was awakened by a banging sound that carried from somewhere inside his brain. The bed felt strange and he opened his eyes carefully and looked around. There was an odd stale odor hanging about the room. The staleness grabbed his throat and forced him to swallow. His mouth was dry. The smell was a very distinct one that he knew, but at that moment could not place. It was then he remembered where he was and he wondered if he had been dreaming when the banging sound started again.

It was a curious sound, far away and coming from somewhere below him. He lifted himself from beneath the warm feather tick and the cold morning air stunned his body. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It was five a.m. Old Popo would be up stoking the furnace. An uncontrollable shiver seized him and he quickly sunk back into the warm hollow left by his body.

He was aware of a new smell sifting through the room. It was one he instantly recognized, a smell of damp coal being ignited by burning wood, a rich pine smell. The faint sulfur tinge hung in the air as vapors penetrated every icy corner. He waited for the room to warm and for the steamed windows to bead and clear. Drops of water forming on the windowpanes left long streaks on the glass as they quickly built up speed only to end up in a tiny puddle on the dusty floor.

The dripping water intensified the urge he had to go to the bathroom and he finally had to get out of the bed. The linoleum would feel like ice beneath his bare feet and as he stared at it, for it seemed to him that every detail of this particular morning deserved careful study, he noticed for the first time the pattern which covered the entire floor—except for a hideous brown strip along the edge. Between the cracks and intertwined with them were hundreds of faded red roses. The black cracks ran throughout, giving the impression that the weight of the iron bed had shattered the delicately woven print. Like everything in his Popo’s house, the linoleum was old.

The coldness bit into his feet as they searched for his slippers on the floor. He cursed himself for not setting them nearby, knelt down and
peered under the high bed. The slippers were not there, but two paths were cut through the thick layer of dust and in the center under the bed were the outlines of the missing slippers. Off to the far left and against the wall rested an old red rubber ball. He couldn’t see it very well, yet he knew it was red and covered with teeth marks. There was no path to it.

He stood up quickly and the sudden movement caused a flurry of tiny dust balls to scatter across the floor. He looked in the closet for his robe, but it wasn’t there. In fact, none of his clothes were. It was then that he became aware of his nakedness. He wasn’t surprised, since he often slept without pajamas, but he felt uncomfortable. Things seemed to be missing. Nothing he could put his finger on—just things that should have been in the room. There were dusty outlines on the dresser, but nothing he could identify. He hurried to the bathroom thinking maybe he had been mistaken.

It was a sterile room with a white tile floor that reflected the bright morning sun. The brilliance made his eyes hurt and blink. The room was immaculate and everything in it was white with a faint antiseptic odor which irritated his nose. The whiteness made the small room glow, an eerie glow that transformed his face into a pale fleshcolored mask as he looked at himself in the mirror. He tried to see the room, but the white glow softened the edges of everything he stared at. He stumbled against the sink. The cold corner sunk into his bare skin like a pin prick. Its sharpness surprised him and he rubbed his eyes to try and clear the clouds that seemed to float in front of him. The sunlight was too bright and he stood out in the hall trying to clear his head.

The attic door was slightly open and he made a move to close it. He thought he heard something above him and opened the door wider and looked up the stairs. They were dark and steep and cluttered with boxes. Some of the lids were off and he could see that most of the boxes were filled with old clothes and shoes. Popo never threw anything away.

He had never been in the attic. It had always been forbidden for him to go there and he had once imagined it was where Popo kept his money hidden. As he looked at the piles of boxes, it seemed that the higher up the stairs he looked, the older they became. At the very top was an old wooden box that he was convinced held Popo’s treasure. He was determined to have a look in it; and remembering past warnings, he crept up the stairs, pausing every now and then to listen.
for any sign of Popo coming.

Just as he reached the top he saw a faint yellow light coming from somewhere deep inside the attic. He panicked. It could be Popo, but then he heard the old man still banging around in the basement. He tried to turn and go back down the steps. The urge to find the source of light was far greater and he continued on. He peeked over the top step and was almost knocked backwards by two huge shadows dancing across the attic wall. In the dim light they appeared as bizarre demons sent to get him for trespassing in Popo's domain. He tried to run, but his legs wouldn't move. He wanted to shout for help, yet he was more afraid of what Popo might do to him. He stood there petrified and, after a few minutes, a calm returned and he realized that whatever the shadows were, they weren't after him.

Now he felt embarrassed by his stupidity and cowardice, but he was still afraid. The fear was more from the total helplessness he had experienced than from whatever the shadows represented. His muscles relaxed and he began moving forward. He felt fear, but not from what he would find. The fear was from how he would react to any danger he might encounter.

His feet moved inches at a time. He tried to move faster, then discovered he had no control over his body. A pile of boxes was in front of him and he wanted to hide behind them and observe what was going on. Instead his body took him past the boxes and into the center of the room.

The two people had not seen him. He stood there for what seemed like hours watching until the woman finally felt his presence and looked at him. She gave the man a nudge and at first the man acted like he didn't want to be bothered, he just sat there and stared out the window. When she poked him again, the man turned around. Neither seemed surprised to see him. The stood together and he got his first good look at them.

They were small and delicate and though they were adults, it stuck him that they looked more like children. The woman was dressed in a long slip. It was torn and he could see the outline of her body reflected in the light. She had nothing on underneath. The man wore an old pair of boxer shorts covered with tiny flowers. They both just stood there looking through and past his face towards the darkness he had come from.

He was frozen in this position and only his eyes were able to move.
They took in the scene as one would look at a snapshot. Every detail clear, yet nothing seeming to be of any significance except for whoever had taken the photograph. Before him was an image—a mattress on the floor for a bed and a lightbulb burning in front of his eyes, adding to the heat that was already building in the attic. A small wooden stool was under the light. On its edge burned a hand rolled cigarette, the smoke from it rising and surrounding the light then disappearing into the dark eaves. Past the still figures and through the tiny attic window he saw buildings, two story structures separated by narrow cobblestone streets. The streets didn't look wide enough for even the smallest automobiles to pass. Although he heard the wind blowing, nothing moved outside. Not even the tall poplars, yet nothing seemed out of place. His surprise was gone. In fact, he felt that he never had any. Everything was as he knew it would be.

His eyes came to rest on the two people again and he could now see them better. They were older than he first realized. Their bodies appeared as if they would float out of the room on the lightest cushion of air.

The woman's breasts were huge and sagged in the way an old woman's would. Her body glistened as drops of sweat that formed on her forehead travelled the length of her long face, down her neck and into the crevice formed by her breasts. The front of her slip was soaked with sweat and the wetness hugged every curve of her body. The wet slip clung tightly around her so that she appeared to be standing there naked. If she noticed, she gave no sign of it.

He looked down at the top of the old man's head. It was bald and covered with beads of sweat which looked as if they were glued to it. What hair he had was gray, close-cropped and stood up like the bristles of a worn out brush. The old man was staring back at him, not moving, facing him as one does a deadly snake that is about to strike. Neither of them took their eyes off the intruder's face and their placid stares forced him to start moving backwards. His eyes flashed from one to the other as their features began to harden and their skin changed from a sun-browned color to a pale opaque white. He felt uneasy as he looked down on them. Every line and wrinkle stood out like a medal from a victorious campaign. There was an acceptance of their life and that sense of pride so evident in people who have made it through life the hard way. It was a look he hated. He wanted to go to the man and shake that tiny head so that the sweat would begin to flow.
By the time he returned to the steps, the light was out and the shadows had blended back into the darkness where they belonged. He seemed to float over each step as he made his way down through the maze of boxes. The top of the wooden box was off and he saw that it was empty, but again this did not surprise him. He had never had such a feeling before. It was as if he had lost control over everything including even his emotions. All this must mean something he knew, but what was it? It wasn't that he didn't care; it was that he couldn't care. Something was holding him back and preventing him from discovering the meaning and, in fact, the only thing that did matter now was that he count the steps. There were twelve.

When he reached the bottom he closed the attic door quietly, but solidly, until he heard the latch click. He heard Popo in the kitchen cursing the old woman for not having his breakfast ready. Her reply was a low grunt in some foreign language, but he recognized the curse. It was as familiar to him as his own name.

The bed was cold as he snuggled under the feather tick once again. He closed his eyes and heard nothing. He listened carefully but still no sounds could be heard anywhere, not even the wind. A picture of the room appeared in his mind and he could see the room as clearly as if he had his eyes open. He visualized every portion of the room, but when he came to the ceiling he couldn't remember what it looked like. He thought how stupid it was not to remember something he had seen so many times and he wracked his brain trying to remember it. He couldn't even remember the color.

He reconstructed the room again in his mind. There was the chest of drawers, a mirror, an old photograph of someone he didn't recognize, the nightstand, but the clock was missing. He listened and couldn't hear the clock ticking. The picture of the room filled his mind again and this time the mirror was missing! He thought maybe there hadn't been a mirror. Maybe he was confusing it with the one in the bathroom. Again the picture and again something missing. Each time he brought the image back another article had disappeared until there was only an empty room, then an empty second floor, an empty house and finally no house at all! He was afraid to open his eyes. Afraid to find out if it was only a dream.

Something warm and wet was beating against his face. There was a sound of breathing that came hot and quick. He opened his eyes and there was old Blackie, her front paws on his pillow. She had the
rubber ball in her mouth and saliva dripped from her glistening pink gums. Next he looked at the clock and saw that it was on the nightstand. He grabbed old Blackie and began to playfully rough her up. She growled and tried to nip him and dropped the rubber ball. He picked it up and threw it out into the hall. She tore after it, sliding across the shiny linoleum. He watched her try in vain to catch the elusive ball and chuckled quietly to himself. Good old Blackie. He sank back on his pillow and closed his eyes. He felt sad because for some reason he couldn't remember, he knew that Blackie would never return.

The sun burnt hot against his face. Popo and his old woman were shouting at each other in the kitchen. The smell of bacon frying drifted up to him and he felt his stomach tighten. He glanced at the clock and saw that Popo would be leaving for work soon. The window had cleared and traces of morning fog still hung in the air. The dark brick smokestacks of the mill were now visible and he watched as red smoke swept up over the lip of the stacks, across the wide valley, and sunk down again to cover the rows of tiny houses huddled together. Everywhere a crimson blush had penetrated and even the trees were trapped in a red glow that hung about them. The only trees that seemed to escape were the ones that grew along the rim of the valley. He watched them sway and bow as the fresh clean air passed through them. The red smoke moved up the valley and left behind the reminder that seemed to stain the very hearts of the people who lived there.

The smoke never stopped and at night he could see the flames and choking vapor spill into the open sky. From his window he would watch tiny figures moving in and out at midnight. Fresh clean faces entered as black matchstick bodies left while behind them glowed the blast furnaces' melting heat. Neither seemed to notice the other or if they did their thoughts remained suffocated perhaps by the red mist that always surrounded them. Above them a blood red moon shone fiercely, but for him it was a pale white disk softened by thin layers of clouds that quickly streaked across the valley.

He could remember as a child watching that devil procession and the nightmares that would follow. In particular, one in which a young man was crushed by a roll of shiny stainless steel, his blood oozing out from under the massive bulk and soaking into the dry earth. A mass
of silent faces watched the flowing red liquid as it passed around their bodies and settled into dark deep pools. The soft muffled cries of a woman pierced the darkness of the dream until they too faded into the morning. He had those dreams no longer, but the remembrance of them was still strong in his mind.

He was tired of thinking and closed his eyes hoping to return to a deep comforting sleep, but he could hear Popo in the basement stoking the fire one last time before he left for work. Bang, bang, bang! The sound echoed up the hall and into his room. It was a ritual that had gone on for what seemed like an eternity. He waited for it to stop and for Popo to climb the wooden stairs, but the banging continued in a maddening rhythm. The noise grew harder and louder until he couldn't stand it.

He climbed out of bed, went out into the hall and peered down the dark, steep stairs. Once again he felt a fear of what he would find on the other end, if there was any, but he continued to walk down. He went slowly and carefully, testing each step as if he was afraid of it giving way. There seemed to be no end to the descent, but the banging was growing louder and now there was a blast of heat pounding his body. The hot currents of air trapped him, engulfed him. He was close to the source; for by now the banging was directly in front of him. The heat was so intense that the walls burned at his touch, but he was not sweating. He finally reached the bottom and saw Popo working furiously to keep the raging fire going.

Popo's shoulders sagged from the weight of the shovel in his hands. The shovel held huge lumps of shiny black coal that burst into flames as soon as Popo threw them into the fire. Sweat covered Popo's body and collected in a pool under him. The water hissed each time his foot stepped into the hot liquid.

Popo saw him and grinned. His white teeth brilliant against his coal-blackened face. The tiny droplets of sweat clinging to his beard reflected red fire from the furnace. As he paused, he took off one of his gloves and wiped the sweat from his brow. Popo held up his hand and laughed as the black water ran off of it and onto the floor. He then turned back to his work for in those few seconds the fire dimmed and a chill crept into the room. Popo worked faster and faster to build the fire back up. Soon it roared again, this time even fiercer. He watched fascinated as Popo kept time by banging the shovel against the furnace's mouth. The coal pile seemed endless, yet the fire ate each
shovelful before it reached the center. Popo looked up and grinned at him again. He motioned for him to pick up another shovel and join him. A terror came over him and he moved back up the stairs and to the safety of his bed.

He listened as Popo climbed the stairs from the basement and said something to the old woman. She uttered a short vicious laugh. Next, he heard the backdoor open and Popo’s heavy footsteps on the porch. He listened to the footsteps and traced the route in his mind. Across the porch, down the steps, and along the path to the gate. Every day. The gate slammed shut and he could now see Popo walking slowly—stooped over as if the lunchbox he carried weighed a hundred pounds. His gray head bobbed up and down and under his left arm was the brown safety hat. He watched Popo walk past the rows of narrow red houses and down the street till Popo disappeared through the gate at the mill.

Then he slipped back onto his pillow and pulled the feather tick tightly around him. His eyes closed, but after what seemed like hours, he opened them again and stared at the ceiling. It was white.